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A JOURNEY TO THE YUCAN, RUSSIAN AMERICA.

BY W. W. KIRBY.

I left home on the 2d of May in a canoe paddled by a couple of Indians belonging to my mission. We followed the ice down the noble McKenzie, staying awhile with Indians wherever we met them, and remained three or four days at each of the forts along the route. On the 11th of June I left the zone in which my life had hitherto been passed, and entered the less genial *arctic* one. Then, however, it was pleasant enough. The immense masses of ice piled on each side of the river sufficiently cooled the atmosphere to make the travelling enjoyable, while the sun shed upon us the comfort of light nearly the whole twenty-four hours. And as we advanced further northward he did not leave us at all. Frequently did I see him describe a complete circle in the heavens.

Between Point Separation and Peel's river we met several parties of Esquimaux, all of whom, from their thievish propensities, gave us a great deal of trouble, and very glad were we to escape out of their hands without loss or injury. They are a fine-looking race of people, and from their general habits and appearance, I imagine them to be much more intelligent than the Indians. And if proof were wanting I think we have it in a girl who was brought up from the coast little more than three years ago, and who now speaks and reads the English language with considerable accuracy. The men are tall, active, and remarkably strong, many of them having a profusion of whiskers and beard. The women are rather short, but comparatively fair, and possess very regular and by no means badly formed features. The females have a very singular practice of periodically cutting the hair from the crown of their husband's head, (leaving a bare place like the tonsure of a Roman Catholic priest,) and fastening the spoil to their own, wear it in bunches on each side of their face, and a third on the top of their head, something in the manner of the Japanese who recently visited the United States. This custom, as you will imagine, by no means improved either their figure or appearance, and as they advance in life, the bundles must become to them uncomfortably large. A very benevolent old lady was most urgent for me to partake of a slice of blubber, but I need hardly say that a sense of *taste* caused me firmly but respectfully to decline accepting her hospitality. Both sexes are inveterate smokers. Their pipes they manufacture themselves, and are made principally of copper; in shape, the bowl is very like a reel used for cotton, and the hole through the centre of it is as large as the aperture of the pipe for holding the tobacco. This they fill, and when lighted will not allow a single whiff to escape, but in the most unsmoker-like manner swallow it all, withholding respiration until the pipe is finished. The effect of this upon their nervous system is extremely great, and often do they fall on the ground completely exhausted, and for a few minutes tremble like an aspen leaf. The heavy beards of the men, and the fair complexions of all, astonished my Indians greatly, and in their surprise called them "Manooli Conde," like white people. They were all exceedingly well dressed in deer-skin clothing, with the hair outside, which being new and nicely ornamented with white fur, gave them a clean and very comfortable appearance. Their little Kyachs were beautifully made, and all the men were well armed with deadly-looking knives, spears, and arrows, all of their own manufacture. The Indians are much afraid of them, and so afraid of my safety were two different parties that I saw on my

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way down that a man from each of them, who could speak a little Eskimos volunteered to accompany me, without fee or reward, and invaluable did I find their services. Poor fellows! they will never see this; but I cannot refrain from paying them here my tribute of gratitude and thanks.

At Peel's river I met with a large number of Loucheux Indians, all of whom received me most kindly, and listened attentively to the glad tidings of salvation I brought unto them. As these are a part of the great family who reach to the Youcan and beyond, I need not dwell upon them here, as their habits will be included in a general description that I shall give of the whole by-and-by. I may, however, remark that from their longer association with the whites many of the darker traits that belong to their brethren on the Youcan apply, if at all, in a much milder form to the Indians there and at Lapene's House.

I left my canoe and Indians, as well as those who accompanied me, at the fort, and taking two others who knew the way, walked over the Rocky mountains to Lapene's House. This part of the journey fatigued me exceedingly—not so much from the distance (which was only from 75 to 100 miles) as from the badness of the walking, intense heat of the sun, and myriads of the most voracious mosquitos that I have met with in the country. The former, I think, would justly defy competition. There were several rivers to ford, which from the melting snows and recent rains were just at their height. Fortunately they were neither very deep nor wide, or my size and strength would have been serious impediments to my getting over them.

At Lapene's House I was delighted to meet Mr. Jones, who was my companion on travel from Red river to Fort Simpson. He had come up in charge of the Youcan boat, and at once kindly granted me a passage down with him. I had fortunately a bundle of Canadian newspapers in my carpet-bag, some of them containing some speeches on educational subjects by his venerable grandfather, the bishop of Toronto. Five days of drifting and rowing down the rapid current of the Porcupine river brought us to its confluence with the Youcan, on the banks of which, about three miles above the junction, the fort is placed. My friend Mr. Lockhart was in charge, and all who know the kindness of his heart need not to be told of the cordial reception that I met with from him. Another hearty grasp was from the energetic naturalist Mr. R. Kennicott, who, under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution, came into the district with me, and passed the greater part of his first winter at Fort Simpson. He delighted me with the assurance that he had met with a vast field, and that his efforts had been crowned with much success, especially in the collection of eggs, many rare and some hitherto unknown ones having been obtained by him; so that the cause of science, in that department, will be greatly benefited by his labors. Among many others I noticed the eggs and parent birds of the American widgion, the black duck, canvas-back duck, spirit duck, (*Bucephala albeola*), small black-head duck, (*Fulix affinis*), the waxwing, (*Ampelis garrulus*), the Kentucky warbler, the trumpeter swan, the duck-hawk, (*Falco anatum*), and two species of juncos. With the exception of the waxwing, however, there were few that have not been obtained in other parts of the district by the persevering zeal of Mr. Ross, the gentleman in charge, and it, I have since learned, nested numerous in the vicinity of my out-station at Bear lake.

On my arrival at the Youcan there were about 500 Indians present, all of whom were astonished, but appeared glad, to see a missionary among them. They are naturally a fierce, turbulent, and cruel race, approximating more nearly to the Plain tribes than to the quiet Chipewyans of the McKenzie valley. They commence somewhere about the 65th degree of north latitude, and stretch westward from the McKenzie to Behring's straits. They were formerly very numerous, but wars among themselves and with the Esquimaux have sadly diminished them. They are, however, still a strong and powerful people. They are divided into many petty tribes, each having its own chief, as the Tā-tlit-Kutchin. (Peel's

River Indians,) Tā-Kūth-Kutchin, (Lapiene's House Indians,) Kutch-a-Kutchin. (Youcan Indians,) Touchon-ta-Kutchin, (Wooded Country Indians,) and many others. But the general appearance, dress, customs, and habits of all are pretty much the same, and all go under the general names of Kutchin (the people) and Loucheux, (squinters.) The former is their own appellation, while the latter was given to them by the whites. There is, however, another division among them of a more interesting and important character than that of the tribes just mentioned. Irrespective of tribe, they are divided into three classes, termed, respectively, Chit-sa, Nate-sa, and Tanges-at-sa—faintly representing the aristocracy, the middle classes, and the poorer orders of civilized nations, the former being the most wealthy and the latter the poorest. In one respect, however, they greatly differ, it being the rule for a man not to marry in his own, but to take a wife from either of the other classes. A Chit-sa gentleman will marry a Tanges-at-sa peasant without the least feeling *infra dig*. The offspring in every case belong to the class of the mother. This arrangement has had a most beneficial effect in allaying the deadly feuds formerly so frequent among them. I witnessed one this summer, but it was far from being of a disastrous nature. The weapons used were neither the native bow nor imported gun, but the unruly tongue, and even it was used in the least objectionable way. A chief, whose tribe was in disgrace for a murder committed the summer before, met the chief of the tribe to which the victim belonged, and in the presence of all commenced a brilliant oration in favor of him and his people, while he feelingly deplored his own and his people's inferiority. At once, in the most gallant way, the offended chief, in a speech equally warm, refuted the compliments so freely offered, and returned them all, with interest, upon his antagonist. This lasted for an hour or two, when the offender, by a skilful piece of tactics, confessed himself so thoroughly beaten that he should never be able to open his lips again in the presence of his generous conqueror. Harmony, of course, was the inevitable result.

The dress of all is pretty much the same. It consists of a tunic or shirt reaching to the knees, and very much ornamented with beads, and Hyaqua shells from the Columbia. The trousers and shoes are attached, and ornamented with beads and shells similar to the tunics. The dress of the women is the same as that of the men, with the exception of the tunic being round instead of pointed in front.

The beads above mentioned constitute the Indian's wealth. They are strung up in lengths, in yards and fathoms, and form a regular currency among them, a fathom being the standard, and equivalent to the "made beaver" of the company. Some tribes, especially the Kutch-a-Kutchin, are essentially traders, and, instead of hunting themselves, they purchase their furs from distant tribes, among whom they regularly make excursions. Often the medicine-men and chiefs have more beads than they can carry abroad with them, and when this happens the company's stores are converted into banking establishments, where the deposits are invested for safe keeping. The women are much fewer in number and live a much shorter time than the men. The latter arises from their early marriages, harsh treatment they receive, and laborious work they have daily to perform, while the former is caused, I fear, by the cruel acts of infanticide which to female children have been so sadly prevalent among them. Praiseworthy efforts have been made by the company's officers to prevent it, but the anguished and hardened mothers have replied that they did it to prevent the child from experiencing the hardships they endured.

The men much reminded me of Plain tribes, with their "birds and feathers, nose jewels of tin, and necklaces of brass," and plentiful supply of paint, which was almost the first time I had seen it used in the district. Instead of the nose jewels being of "tin" they were composed of the Hyaqua shells which gave the expression of the face a singular appearance. The women did not use

much paint, its absence was atoned for by tattooing, which appeared universal among them. This singular custom seems to be one of the most widely diffused practices of savage life; and was not unknown among the ancients, as it, or something like it, seems to be forbidden to the Jews, "ye shall not print any marks upon you," Lev. xix, 28.

Polygamy, as in almost all other barbarous nations, is very prevalent among them, and is often the source of much domestic unhappiness among them. The New Zealander multiplies his wives for show, but the object of the Kutchin is to have a greater number of poor creatures whom he can use as beasts of burden for hauling his wood, carrying his meat, and performing the drudgery of his camp. They marry young, but no courtship precedes, nor does any ceremony attend the union. All that is requisite is the sanction of the mother of the girl, and often is it a matter of negotiation between her and the suitor when the girl is in her childhood. The father has no voice in the matter whatever, nor any other of the girl's relatives.

The tribes frequenting Peel's river bury their dead on stages, the corpse being securely enclosed in a rude coffin made of hollowed trees. About the Youcan they were formerly burnt, the ashes collected, placed in a bag, and suspended on the top of a painted pole. Nightly wailings follow for a time, when the nearest relative makes a feast, invites his friends, and for a week or so the dead dance is performed, and a funeral dirge sung, after which all grief for the deceased is ended. I witnessed their dance at the fort, and have been told by others that the dead song is full of wild and plaintive strains, far superior to the music of any other tribes in the country.

Altars, or rites of religion, they had none, and before the traders went there not even an idea of a God to be worshipped. Medicine men they had, in whose powers they placed implicit faith; and whose aid they dearly purchased in seasons of sickness or distress. They were, emphatically, a people "without God in the world." Knowing their prejudices, I commenced my labors among them with much fear and trembling; but earnestly looking to God for help and strength, and cannot doubt that both were granted. For, before I left, the medicine men openly renounced their craft, polygamists freely offered to give up their wives, murderers confessed their crimes, and mothers told of deeds of infanticide that sickened one to hear. Then all earnestly sought for pardon and grace. Oh! it was a goodly sight to see that vast number, on bended knees, worshipping the God of their salvation, and learning daily to syllable the name of Jesus. Since my return I have read a glowing picture of savage life, when left to its native woods and streams, and heartily as I feel that I could be a friend of him who is, in truth, the friend of the aborigines, yet sadly do I feel that between theory and fact there is often a gaping discrepancy. To draw a picture of savage life is one thing, to see "the heathen in his darkness" is another. To speak of the Indian roaming through his native woods, now skimming over the glassy lake, or floating down the silent current, may be to show the poetry of his life; but there is the sterner chapter of reality to place over against it. From that chapter the above remarks have been gathered, they present the heathen as they are in themselves. For twenty years have not yet elapsed since the white man planted his foot in the Youcan valley, and since he has been there his influence has been to improve, and not to contaminate. And if a testimony be valuable, more from the cause to which it is given than from the source whence it proceeds, most heartily do I bear mize to the humane and considerate treatment that the Indians of the Mackenzie river district receive from the officers of the company. In many instances that I could mention, the officer is more like the parent of a large family of adult children than what his position represents. The undoubted fact is, that the whole tendency of heathenism is to brutalize and debase, while it remains with civilization and the Gospel to elevate and to bless.

Should you desire, I shall be happy next season to give you a few of the Indian legends, as well as some account of the geology and fauna of my journey. The flora, I do not sufficiently understand to say anything about, although, from the great variety of plants that I saw, there must have been many interesting to botanists. When at Red river, I read a paper by Mr. Barnston, on the growth of the onion on the banks of the Porcupine river, and I have much pleasure in being able to confirm his statements, that it is not the real onion, but the chive that grows in such abundance there.

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